

NSC BRIEFING

29 July 1959

NORTHERN SEA ROUTE

- I. The USSR has now started its annual scramble to resupply the many military and scientific installations along its Arctic coast which are of such strategic importance to the Soviets vis-a-vis the U.S.
 - A. Over the next month and a half, some 400 vessels are expected to enter the Arctic coastal waters from both east and west in order to move over a million tons before the ice freezes over completely in October.
 - B. The installations which depend on the success of this operation include 5 major airfields with runways of 8,000 feet or over which are often used by LRAF jet medium and heavy bombers, and numerous other support fields.
- C. Perhaps just as important are some 112 meteorological or other scientific stations and the more than 75 air defense radar sites between the Bering Straits and the White Sea which provide complete radar coverage of the air approach over the USSR's arctic coast.
- II. This operation is carried out by the Chief Directorate of the Northern Sea Route, now in the Ministry of the Merchant Fleet, which has been responsible for developing the entire trans-Arctic route from Novaya Zemlya to the Bering Straits (2800 miles) since 1932.

- A. USSR has been trying to master this route since turn of the century—first successful transit in 1932.
1. Principle obstacles have been Arctic ice, barrenness of coastal areas, relative absence of good natural harbors, isolation from other transport links, heavy fogs and, in some areas, temperatures ^{reaching lows of} as low as minus 40 and 50 F ^{highs} in winter and not much above freezing. ^{in summer}
 2. Even labor force had to be imported.
 3. USSR north of 60 N, which includes barren area served by Northern Sea Route, comprises 40% of USSR land mass, but has only 2% of population and contributes only 4% of nation's total production.
- B. Operation has been given increasing priority, particularly as the northern areas have become of greater significance to the defense of the USSR.
1. Now involves vast complex of island and coastal stations, communications, aircraft, and ice breakers—all needed to support the movement of cargo vessels in the hazardous passage.
- C. Arctic route also used to transfer naval craft from the west to Soviet Pacific Fleet.
1. Since 1954, 151 naval craft, including 41 long range subs and about half of the major ships now in the Pacific have been transferred by this route.
 2. It is risky, however, and sometimes whole convoys get iced in. In 1956, seventeen naval vessels were forced to winter in the area. Last year, none of the naval craft made it all the way through and were forced to turn back.

III. Principal maritime use of Northern Sea Route is as supply route into the Arctic rather than as through commercial passage.

- A. Except for naval craft being transferred to Soviet Pacific Fleet, ships rarely make the whole transit unless ice conditions block return to port of origin.**
- B. Normally, vessels from both east and west penetrate no further than Tiksi in the central sector.**
- C. This normal pattern, however, is adjusted according to ice conditions in the Vilkitskiy and Longa Straits (open 45 days and 90 days respectively during average season). These are the problem areas for the route and normally become completely impassable by mid-October.**
- D. Northern Sea Route operations got off to early start this year but have encountered difficulties.**
 - 1. In the east, the first two convoys transited Longa Strait and on 23 June--earlier than usual--arrived at Pevek with high priority cargo (some suspicion of association with missile program). Two more convoys waiting to go through Longa Strait--again frozen over.**

IV. The volume of cargo handled on the Northern Sea Route has increased three fold over the past six years and now is well over 1,000,000 tons.

- A. In addition to carrying cargo in to Arctic area--most of which destined for military or military-associated installations, vessels on Northern Sea Route also carry out timber, coal, and ore (primarily tin and bauxite).
1. In addition to Soviet vessels, some 30-40 western vessels are chartered to carry timber for export.
- B. Soviets plan to lengthen the shipping season to six months and to almost double the cargo handled to 2.4 million tons by 1985.
1. The atomic-powered icebreaker Lenin is expected to see service in the route next year.
 2. The ice-breaker fleet has been modernized and expanded by the import of nine icebreakers from Finland and Holland.

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V. Operations of the Northern Sea Route are increasingly supplemented by use of the great north-flowing Siberian rivers and aircraft of the Soviet Polar Aviation fleet.

- A. The rivers become ice-free sooner than the Northern Sea Route and supplies delivered by the trans-Siberian railroad to river ports can be floated down rivers as the ice breaks up, arriving at the mouth ready for coastwise delivery well before larger ships can get through the Arctic Straits.

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- H. When the route becomes ice-locked in October, only aircraft and overland tractor ⁸trains can be used to supply remote installations.
1. Aircraft operate year-round in the Soviet Arctic and are essential carriers, but without the large volume of bulk cargoes delivered by the Northern Sea Route in the summer months, maintenance of the USSR's strategic installations in the north would be inordinately expensive.

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